



GROWING PHEASANTS NATURALLY

FWP, the BLM, and Pheasants Forever team up to improve upland bird habitat on public land in south-central Montana

BY BOB GIBSON

Pheasant hunters in parts of south-central Montana will be in for a big surprise this season. “They’ll be seeing fields of standing corn and sorghum that will make them think they’re hunting in the Dakotas,” says Rick Northrup, statewide game bird coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Northrup is talking about winter food plots planted this past spring as part of a new cooperative project between a coalition of government agencies and a private conservation group.

For years Pheasants Forever and its associated arm, Habitat Forever, have provided

seed, expertise, and labor to Great Plains farmers who wanted to convert agricultural fields to upland game bird habitat. In Montana, the habitat enhancement has a new twist. An initiative—jointly funded by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Pheasants Forever—focuses exclusively on public land.

Last year, Pheasants Forever hired Dennis Yurian of Worden to farm three pieces of public land specifically for upland birds. The veteran Yellowstone County farmer worked former agricultural fields at Pompeys Pillar National Monument, the Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area east of Billings, and

the Sundance Lodge Special Recreation Management Area east of Laurel.

By summer, Yurian had converted 292 acres of former farm fields and river bottoms to vegetation specifically grown for pheasants and other upland birds. He planted 93 acres of winter food crops and 19 acres of rank grasses (dense nesting cover) to protect birds and their young from foul weather. He also hayed, mowed, applied herbicide, fertilized, and seeded an additional 161 acres that will become dense nesting cover and brood-rearing habitat. Currently he is in the early stages of converting another 19 acres of river bottoms into permanent wetlands, which provide essential winter cover for upland birds. Plans call for Yurian to improve habitat over the next three years on hundreds of additional acres scattered over six public sites in south-central Montana.

Matt O'Connor of Hopkinton, Iowa, oversees habitat teams, including the Montana project, for Pheasants Forever. The Montana effort, he says, is intended to build and improve habitat to attract and grow wild pheasants and other birds naturally. "The Yellowstone River Valley has a heck of a lot of potential," O'Connor says. "It has a tradition of public recreational use over the years. But without this unique partnership, we couldn't get anything done." The fact that all of the work is close to Billings—Montana's largest population center—is a bonus, he adds.

Under the five-year agreement, Yurian works for Pheasants Forever, but the BLM and FWP share most of the costs. Jay Parks, a wildlife biologist for the BLM's Billings field office, was instrumental in drafting plans and goals for the shared project. "The idea is that if you improve habitat, they will come," Parks says.

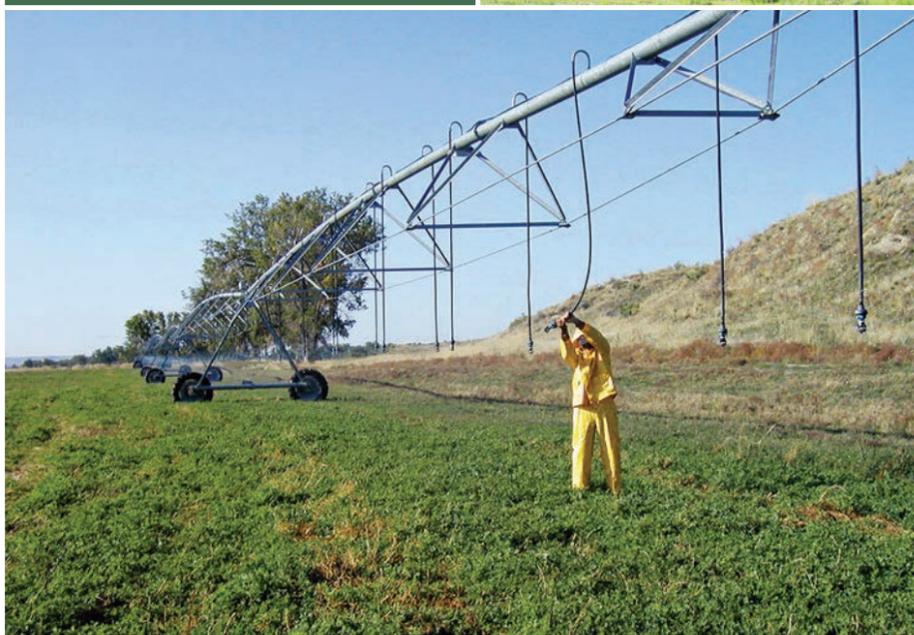
Parks expects the new habitat will attract waterfowl, turkeys, sharp-tailed grouse, deer, and songbirds and other nongame species as well as pheasants. "We want to benefit bird watching and nonconsumptive uses in addition to hunting," he says.

Pheasants Forever recently hired another habitat specialist for the Lewistown area, where clusters of public and private land

Bob Gibson manages the FWP Regional Information and Education Program in Billings.



GROWING GAME BIRDS Clockwise from top: Irrigated hay fields are reseeded to upland bird winter food plots and dense nesting cover at the Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area. Seeding a winter food plot for pheasants and other upland birds at the Sundance Lodge Special Recreation Management Area. Dennis Yurian, Pheasants Forever habitat specialist, adjusts center-pivot irrigation nozzles on an upland bird food plot at the Yellowstone WMA.



PHOTOS BY BOB GIBSON/MONTANA FWP

have "good upland potential," O'Connor says. O'Connor considers the cooperative project in the Yellowstone River Valley a success, even though the work has barely begun. "We have sportsmen talking about winter food, nesting cover, brood-rearing—about habitat for upland birds," he says. "In addition

to doing intensive habitat work, we have increased awareness." Northrup adds that those who have hunted Pompeys Pillar, Yellowstone WMA, and Sundance Lodge in the past are in for a big surprise this fall. "All I can say is that they might want to consider bringing along an extra box of shells." 🐾